

Sexual Harassment, #MeToo and Feminism

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As no Chartist reader can fail to have noticed, the last weeks of 2017 saw an eruption of condemnation and protest against sexual predators in the work place. Although it started in the US, this has become a global movement. The MeToo hashtag has trended in one version or another in a hundred countries and been posted many millions of times. Indeed, as I write, Time magazine has named the 'silence breakers' of the #MeToo movement its 'Person of the Year' <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/> and the Hollywood Golden Globe awards have bypassed movies associated with Weinstein productions.

There is nothing new about sexual harassment. As a way of controlling women and demonstrating male power it has been around for centuries and has been focused on by feminists of the second wave since the early 1980s (although 19th century feminists were also concerned about the issues). What is different, and what the current shock wave has exposed, often in graphic detail, is the widespread and often shameless nature of this exercise of power which is— wielded across the full range of work places, from parliament to the hospitality industry and schools, usually by relatively established men over younger less-established women. These acts, extending from the monumentally crude, as in the case of Harvey Weinstein, to the micro subtle impositions designed to humiliate and confuse, have not only turned out to be more commonplace than most people were aware but have also generated, in the space of a few months, an unprecedented, visceral, world-wide resistance and fight back.

So why has this protest emerged now? What is different socially and politically about the current context? How does it fit with second wave feminism? Should it be given an uncritical welcome?

It is not new to suggest that the #MeToo campaign is part of an ongoing revolt against the election of Trump and his brazen, self-promoting – and as yet unpunished -- serial sexual assaults on women in public places and an extension of the protest demonstrations in which an estimated 5 million women around the world participated following his inauguration. So the Weinstein revelations, although the trigger for the #MeToo retaliation, are in fact part of a longer process of growing insurrection against the misogyny and bullying that many women are subjected to on a daily basis in the work places of the modern world.

But are things worse now or are women just less inclined to endure the indignities and inequalities of everyday life? A bit of both probably. Although women are still not paid the same as men for work of equal value, over the last decades they have nevertheless made great strides in terms of their economic and social status. So although sexual harassment can be understood in part as an exercise of embedded power by men – they do it because they can, because they always have -- it can also be interpreted, at least in part, as an attempt to hang on to increasingly precarious and diminishing male privilege.

A second factor contributing to the situation today is the exponential growth of internet activity, of sexual trolling and online pornography in which the pliability and degradation of women is

normalised, and which is consumed mainly by men, often over the course of the working day. The internet has however also provided the networking infrastructure for the resistance movement – the opportunity for women to communicate with each other, to recognise and define the processes of oppression and to fight back against bullying. Together these antagonistic aspects of social media have contributed to the growing recognition by women, especially younger ‘millennial’ women, of structural inequality and what is increasingly referred to as ‘the patriarchy’.

Feminists of my generation, particularly socialist feminists, wrestled with this concept during the 1970s and ‘80s and, in part because of our roots on the left, tried to work out the relationship of patriarchy to capitalism. The usual assumption was that capitalism was *the* determining force, and that because capitalist relations of production benefitted from women’s cheap and malleable labour, strategies were developed to maintain the status quo. Others (I was among them) argued that capitalism was indifferent to the gender of its labour power and that it was patriarchal structures, ie men as men, that kept women in their place. And I think that is borne out in the current scenario. The patriarchy we are witnessing today, in which men harass to assert and display power -- sometimes simply because they have been brought up to do so, because of pervasive ideas about masculinity, and sometimes as part of a struggle to defend their ascendancy in the modern public world -- is a rear-guard attempt to keep women in their place.

So, in their invocation of ‘patriarchy’ I think the #MeTooers have got it right. The feminism of young women today is not the same as ours. For a start, in part because of the high profile of Trump and Weinstein, it’s now a mass movement – as Time magazine has shown us. Last summer an ICM survey of teenage girls reported that the majority identified as feminists. What we are now witnessing is a surge of mainstream, populist, assertive feminism quite different from the left-wing radical and marginal versions of the 1970s. The current wave is less concerned with conceptual equivocation and, interestingly, seems rather less libertarian in its attitudes to sexuality than was ours. This too has had a bearing on the responses of older feminists to the present crisis. One of the key demands of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the late 1960s and 1970s was for sexual freedom on equal terms with men. This was a reaction against conservative ideas about femininity and the constraints imposed on women and girls’ sexuality in 1950s and ‘60s which operated even in the countercultures of political and social protest. Although the emphasis in feminist thought shifted somewhat over the course of the 1980s as sexual abuse was increasingly registered, this initial focus on liberation and pleasure made a significant contribution to the formation of ideas about sexual behaviour for a generation of women. It is this context which also made us fairly robust in the face of unwanted advances. It is no coincidence that older feminists have been notably overrepresented among those who have said ‘we learned to cope, to be tough, to slap down wandering hands’ etc. Danger and risk were all part of the public world we had felt excluded from, so we put up with what is now called ‘inappropriate’ behaviour (see for instance most recently Glenda Jackson in *Stage*).

Therefore, although feminists of my generation are immensely sympathetic to the #MeToo campaign they are also a bit bemused about the gravity attributed to what sometimes seems to us rather light-weight routine come-ons. I include myself here. But I have shifted in the course of writing this piece and talking to younger women. I have become more sensitive to the indignity of minor infractions and increasingly respect the courage and risk involved in taking a stand and making public accusations. The fight back is definitely to be celebrated. This will be a long war of attrition but progress is being made. Men are taking note. All that is very good news.

But significant questions remain. Where to draw the line? What should be done? The tricky issues of definition, proportionality and natural justice are hardly addressed by the #MeToo

protesters or their advocates. Legal principles seem to have been suspended. Significant problems in the identification of the scale and harm of sexual harassment and in knowing how to respond are unresolved. We should not be lulled by the excitement of battle into making dodgy accusations and bypassing due process. As Ruth Levine has put it, we should avoid ‘yielding to the desire for retribution, which only perpetuates brutality’ and instead work for ‘restorative justice, which holds the potential for genuine accountability and lasting change’

http://bostonreview.net/gender-sexuality/judith-levine-will-feminisms-past-mistakes-haunt-metoo#.WivnZ_X8xNd.email

So how to move forward? The solution should surely be to focus, where possible, on change and education, not vengeance. And we must absolutely keep in mind that not all men fit the #MeToo characterisations of predatory masculinity, that men’s behaviour has changed enormously in the last fifty years and will continue to do so. Moreover, women can also be liars and bullies and quite often collude in the harassment of other women (most recently Jayda Fransen, deputy leader of the extreme right-wing group Britain First, has been accused by a fellow member in her organisation of attempting to silence a woman who made harassment claims. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/dec/03/jayda-fransen-tried-to-stop-sex-assault-complaint>)

What we are left with is a deeply complex picture. There are no easy answers. So, in conclusion, my message to my teenage granddaughters is: take care, be brave, organise, challenge and take action if necessary. But remember that it’s important to keep things in proportion, that masculinity is constantly in flux and most men are OK, and that online fraudsters and trolls are likely to be more dangerous than your average male teacher, school mate or boss. Whether or not the advice of their grandmother will be rated, I don’t know.

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